

Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs – A true story of courage and perseverance with a happy ending.

In June 1940 51st Highland Division was forced to surrender at St Valery en Caux. The division had been left to defend the evacuation at Dunkirk and no ammunition or food remained. 2nd Battalion Seaforth Highlanders were part of this division and the Acting Commanding Officer, Major Murray Grant, agreed that those who wished could make a break for it. Lt Richard Broad and six soldiers in his platoon decided to make a move to escape along the north coast of France towards Le Havre and hoped to find a boat to get across the Channel. They set off at night in uniform and with rifles. Out of the darkness another figure suddenly appeared who was identified as Private George Dodd from another company in the Battalion and he was allowed to join them.

Lt Broad, who spoke some French, and seven soldiers then set off heading west along the coast travelling mainly at night. Finding food was a problem but some French farmers helped. Crossing the River Seine on a self-made raft was a disaster and Pte Dodd lost his boots and most of his clothes. Local people again came to their help and clothes and some footwear was provided for Pte Dodd. Eventually a boat was found to take them over the Seine but it was not suitable for crossing the Channel. The group of eight continued west as according to local opinion they would find a boat at Honfleur. They were still in uniform apart from Pte Dodd which meant that if they were captured by German troops they would not be taken for spies and shot.

Reaching Fatouville near Honfleur, Lt Broad first met 19 year-old Raymond Lescene who was to play such a pivotal role in the story by helping to bring provisions to the men and passing messages. The Mother Superior, Georgina Knapp born in England, ran the hospital-hospice in Honfleur and heard of the soldiers' plight from Raymond Lescene's sister and immediately offered to help. After arranging to hide the eight men in a house on the Cote de Grace for a while, the Mother Superior with the Commissaire de Police, Monsieur Bailleul, the senior policeman, decided that the party should be split up and hidden in various houses in and around Honfleur. Eight all together was too great a risk. By this time the party had been given the code name Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Transporting the Scottish soldiers, the Jocks, was highly dangerous and this was usually accomplished by Soeur Marie Gabriel from the Convent in her pony and trap with the jocks hidden under sacking in the trap and also in the boot of Madame Nicole Bouchet de Farenein's Citroen.

So followed a period of five months of frustration for Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. No boat could be found. There was not much to occupy them, no television, not much radio, and few English books but when they could they helped their hosts. Many of the men of Honfleur had joined the French Army and had been killed or were now prisoners of war. A few had gone south to Vichy France. The ladies of Honfleur were taking an enormous personal risk to themselves. If they were discovered hiding British soldiers they would be shot. It is common practise for ladies to gossip, for children to chatter and boast at school but clearly this never happened in Honfleur. Food for everyone was in short supply but Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs never went hungry.

By January 1941, however, Monsieur Bailleul felt that rumours were starting to circulate in Honfleur and the position of the Jocks was becoming more difficult to contain. It was decided that they should move to Paris for onwards transmission to Marseilles from where they would make plans to cross

the Pyrenees into Spain. With Lt Broad the only French speaker the train journey to Paris was fraught with danger but they all arrived and spent about a week in an apartment before moving on to cross into Vichy France and on to Marseilles where they were imprisoned. An escape was arranged, a guide found to take them over the Pyrenees and they arrived in Barcelona where they were again incarcerated in a much more unpleasant prison. The British embassy in Madrid obtained their release to Madrid where again they found themselves imprisoned until the embassy obtained their release and they were moved by train and bus to Gibraltar. From Gibraltar they went on to Liverpool arriving in May 1941.

Lt Broad was awarded an MC and was seconded to special operations in such places as Madagascar but the Seven Dwarfs returned to the Seaforth Highlanders and all survived the war. After the war Lieutenant Colonel Broad, as he had become, visited Honfleur to show his appreciation and gratitude to the people of Honfleur.

The book 'The Long Way Round' by William Moore, ends with a wish that someday someone would place a testimonial to the brave women of Honfleur to be hung in the little chapel there. In 2013 the Mayor of Honfleur decided that there should be a memorial to the ladies of Honfleur, so the challenge was for some of the British and French community in Honfleur to work towards achieving this wish. Jenny Hellier and Colin Harrison arrived in The Highlanders Museum in Fort George near Inverness and asked if it would be possible to locate any relatives of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. Richard Broad's son and daughter in law, Michael and Jacquie, were found in Wales but unfortunately Michael was too unwell to travel. A nephew and two nieces of George Dodd were also tracked down and were very pleased to be asked to the commemoration in Honfleur. Mr Seoras McIntosh, who had been a Queen's Own Highlander but whose father had been a Seaforth at St Valery, agreed to go to represent the Seaforth Highlanders with Pipe Major Richard Anderson who had been a piper with 2nd Battalion 51 Highland Volunteers.

The "Regimental group" therefore consisted of Mr McIntosh, PM Anderson, Mr and Mrs Stan Baker George Dodd's nephew, Miss Tricia Baker, a niece and Mrs Kay Lowe, also a niece. They arrived together in the evening on 5th June at Le Havre to be met by the historian Monsieur Pierre Jan and Jenny Hellier. They were taken to Honfleur where there was a reception in Les Salles des Association and then on to visit a German blockhaus that is to be turned into a museum.

6th June started with a ceremony at the War Memorial led by the Mayor and Mr Seoras McIntosh who then headed the procession from the War Memorial piped by PM Anderson and cheered by the crowd through Honfleur to the chapel. A plaque was unveiled outside La Chapelle de l'hôpital which is on Place Jean de Vienne, Honfleur with a lady present aged 88 who was a daughter of the Lust family. George Dodd had been sheltered by the Lust family and his nephew and nieces had the opportunity to meet this lady.

The proceedings moved inside the chapel where Mr Seoras McIntosh presented the Seaforth pipe banner and Seaforth tartan to the Mayor of Honfleur. There were speeches by the Mayor and by Seoras and the plaque from the Regiment was unveiled. The wording of the plaque is "This pipe banner is placed here in honour and gratitude to the brave women of Honfleur who risked so much to shelter soldiers of the Seaforth Highlanders in 1940." The plaque was blessed by the priest whose family come from St Valery en Caux.

After the ceremony in the chapel the Pipe Major played a lament as everyone walked to the Town Hall for the vind'honneur followed by lunch at the Cote de Grace restaurant. Mr Stan Baker made a speech after lunch in the garden of the restaurant and the Mayor replied adding that all the British present were to be honorary Honfleurais. Bottles of Calvados were presented and the Pipe Major again entertained everyone on the pipes.

Stan and Chris Baker, Tricia Baker and Kay Lowe with Seoras and the Pipe Major were taken to see the house of Mme Turgis who had hidden so many of the Dwarfs in 1940 and to her grave in St Leonard's cemetery where they were also shown the grave of Raymond Lescene who as a teenager in 1940 had been so much help to all the group. (Raymond was taken for forced labour in Germany and contracted TB and sadly died in 1945. Lt Broad arranged for a gravestone to be erected and the Seven Dwarfs each contributed 2s/6d as none of them ever forgot how much they owed to Raymond).

On 7th June the British hosts in Honfleur entertained the visiting British party to lunch in a local restaurant. Seoras publicly paid tribute to Jenny Hellier and Colin Harrison for all that they had done to make the visit such a success. The Pipe Major was persuaded to play another tune or two ending with Auld Lang Syne with the other restaurant guests including the French Civil Service joining in the Anglo / French celebrations.

So ended a memorable and at times very moving tribute to the Ladies of Honfleur for their great courage in 1940.

James Murray
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